

International Partnership Programme for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage
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COUNTRY REPORT: Cambodia
Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage
Performing Arts: Royal Ballet is special

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The Kingdom of Cambodia is one of the oldest countries in southeast Asia. It abounds in artistic and cultural remains from prehistory to the present time. This cultural heritage includes pots, stone axes and other stone tools, and monuments, Buddhist temples, statues, inscriptions and manuscripts ...etc.

Cambodia possesses a long and unique cultural history, the product of thousands of years of civilisation. Although some of this culture is literally carved in stone, other elements are more ephemeral, existing only in the memory of the people.

Unfortunately during the last 3 decades, the cultural heritage especially the ancient monuments, has been ruined and degraded either by nature or by human beings.

During the Pol Pot regime (1975-1979) the majority of Cambodia's artists perished, and with them, more than half of Cambodia's performing arts, and other arts were similarly affected; this event demonstrated the fragility of oral culture.

In recent years, the Department of Performing Arts Ministry of Culture and Fine Art, working closely in cooperation with UNESCO, has been publishing an inventory of the intangible culture heritage of Cambodia. As defined by the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, at the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO, intangible heritage comprises “all forms of traditional practices, representation and expression, as well as the associated knowledge and the necessary skills that have been transmitted orally from generation to generation.

The aim of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is to enhance the idea of protecting and preserving these cultural properties and to inform Khmer people for their better understanding.

Under guideline, the national constitution with Chapter VI and Article 69.70.71, the law provides for safeguarding the intangible culture heritage.

The focus on Cambodian traditional performing art identifies five main performing art genres which include over 83 titles of classical dance, 49 folk dances and popular dances more than 20 forms of theatre and musical forms and traditional circus. The variety of these art forms is astonishing.

The performing arts also cover Cambodia's long history; some date back to antiquity while others only came into existence within the last century.

The Royal Government of Cambodia submitted six art forms for consideration as intangible world cultural heritage (1) classical dance or Royal Ballet (2) large shadow theatre (3) Khoal drama (4) jewelry (5) weaving and (6) Chapei, to ensure the sustainable continuity of intangible art.

The artists as well as all the Khmer people were very proud that the Royal Ballet of Cambodia was proclaimed a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity by UNESCO on November 7, 2003, because this art form reflects the zenith of spirituality, wisdom and technical skill within all other performing art forms in Cambodia. The oldest and sacred art forms date back to between 1st - 6th centuries.

In the period of Angkor civilisation, Royal Ballet dancers were called Apsara derived from the Sanskrit word meaning "celestial dancer" and recognized as servants of god. Royal Ballet is a sacred dance form in which the Apsara Dancers were the essence of celestial purity believed to provide the link through which prayer passed from the king to the realm of the deities. They were seen as messengers of peace between the earthly and celestial plane in order to bring good harvest, prosperity and protection for the kingdom.

Classical dances perform a vast repertoire of stories from the Reamker, commissioned by the early Angkor kings. This moral story charts Rama's love for Sita and her abduction by the evil king Ravana.

In this early form, classical dance was reserved strictly for female dancers who performed four main roles the female role (neang), male role (Neay Rong), giant role (yeak), and monkey role (Sva). There are also a number of supplementary roles, including clown, hermit and a number of birds and animals. All roles were originally performed by female dancers. Only later in the development of the form was the monkey role played by a male dancer, and this continues until the present day.

The Classical dance is an art form in which the dancers use artistic gestures and the expression of emotion to tell a story.

To day's dance gestures are identical to those seen on Angkor temple walls which are filled with these dancing images. The dances are symbolic and have slow graceful gestures that conform to a strict and precise language of movement with its own vocabulary and punctuation. The costumes, headdresses, movement and gestures identify the character and constitute an act of worship and blessing.

Classical dance is accompanied by a chorus, consisting of mostly female vocalists and the traditional Pin Peat Orchestra.

Classical dance and all traditional art forms almost perished between 1975-1979, and great efforts have been made to revive many classical dances and dramas since that period. The following

inventory demonstrates the extensive repertoire made to the present day to revive and preserve this important sacred expression of Cambodia's cultural heritage.

We hope that this lecture on "performing arts of Cambodia, especially classical dance" will serve to strengthen the national identity of Cambodia and support on going conservation and development in the nation, in the region, and in the world.